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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the writing of language arts report cards. Eleven elementary teachers from three districts volunteered to compose report cards while thinking aloud. The teachers worked in districts that exerted varying degrees of control over teachers' choice of language arts instructional materials and assessment. Analysis of the 75 report card protocols indicated that teachers wrote report cards for specific purposes and audiences, and consideration of the audience and purpose influenced the information that teachers included. While writing report cards, teachers faced conflicts that revolved around issues of how best to evaluate literacy, the ability of the report card to adequately accommodate teachers' knowledge of students, and the congruence between instructional goals and the content and form of reporting required by the report card. (A table presenting the format of language arts report cards in the three districts is included.) (Author/RS)

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Writing Language Arts Report Cards: Eleven Teachers' Conflicts of Knowing and Communicating

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Abstract

This study investigated the writing of language arts report cards. 11 elementary teachers from 3 districts volunteered to compose report cards while thinking aloud. The teachers worked in districts that exerted varying degrees of control over teachers' choice of language arts instructional materials and assessment. Analysis of the 75 report card protocols indicated that teachers wrote report cards for specific purposes and audiences, and consideration of the audience and purpose influenced the information that teachers included. While writing report cards, teachers faced conflicts that revolved around the issues of how best to evaluate literacy, the ability of the report card to adequately accommodate teachers' knowledge of students, and the congruence between instructional goals and the content and form of reporting required by the report card.

Writing Language Arts Report Cards: Eleven Teachers' Conflicts of Knowing and Communicating

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Most adults remember getting report cards and dealing with the evaluations they contained and the attendant parental and peer consequences. In elementary school, report cards are generally seen as the central communication to the home about a child's school progress. They are a time-honored ritual, and although standardized tests have attracted most of the recent interest in the area of assessment, report cards are at least as significant to most students. For example, that child abuse occurs in conjunction with report cards is illustrated by Valentine (1990), who quotes a child abuse prosecutor and member of Baltimore City's Advisory Commission for Children and Youth as commenting that: "The most common forms of abuse...involve excessive beatings with a belt, or looped electric cord...across a child's back or legs...We're talking physical injuries, not mental or verbal abuse." In a rare example of sensitivity to the seriousness of this problem, the city school district sends home a flier with report cards telling parents how to respond to low grades.

Despite their significance, report cards have drawn little research attention. The work that has been done suggests that, first, report cards tend to be similar across districts, largely requiring a grade and a brief comment in each of a variety of subjects that are usually subdivided in a highly reductionistic manner (Bray, 1986; Freeman & Hatch, 1989). Second, report cards are expected to serve a variety of audiences and functions simultaneously, including informing parents of students' progress, changing students' attitudes, involving parents in the educational process, maintaining school records of students' progress, and motivating and directing teachers (Goacher & Reid, 1983). Third, report cards are almost invariably standardized within a school or district, and many teachers have no voice in the development of the standard form within which they must report (Afflerbach & Sammons, 1991; Goacher & Reid, 1983).

Report cards are not only a significant event for students but also for the teachers who have to write them. Given the results of previous research, this should hardly be surprising. Report cards present teachers with a highly constrained, unusual, and often seriously consequential writing task. Since teachers usually have little say in the development of report cards, the writing of a report card often marks the intersection of two value systems: those of the teacher and those of the school system represented by the report card. It is likely that teachers frequently find themselves writing for conflicting audiences and purposes, within a format that

may well conflict with their ethical and philosophical beliefs about the structure of the domain to be reported on, the nature of children's learning, and the relative importance of descriptive and quantitative or categorical evaluations. Yet virtually nothing is known about how teachers write report cards. In a sense, we do not know what report cards mean, since we do not know what went into their production. Nonetheless, given what is known about report cards, it seemed to us that practical and ethical dilemmas must surface as teachers compose report card grades.

In her study of "Dilemmas of knowing," Lyons (1990) describes examples of the ethical and epistemological dilemmas teachers face in the normal course of their work, including the teaching of controversial issues and content and the establishing of relationships with students. Lyons's research examines the constructed and personal nature of teachers' knowledge and the complex web of relationships among teachers' knowledge of the content they teach, of their students and themselves, and of their relationships with their students. Most importantly, Lyons highlights the dilemmas teachers face as conflicts arise between their stances towards themselves as knowers, toward their students as knowers and learners, and toward the subject matter of particular disciplines. Lyons argues that, her work notwithstanding, the dilemmas teachers face remain relatively unexplored and desperately in need of description so that we might more fully understand and respect the complexity of teaching and teachers' knowledge. According to Lyons (1990, p. 161): "Although researchers, educators, and scholars have argued that knowledge and values are important dimensions of teaching, implicit in a teacher's sense of mission and critical to a conception of practice, there is a remarkable absence of good descriptions of how they are involved in teachers' lives or in their growth and learning."

Report cards can provide a means of investigating critical links between important domains of evaluation and teachers' "dilemmas of knowing." We attempted to study how some teachers manage the process of writing report cards. Drawing on other investigations of composition processes (e.g. Hayes & Flower, 1980), we asked teachers to think out loud as they wrote report cards. The think-aloud procedure is particularly suited to problem-solving situations that have well-defined problem spaces (Ericsson & Simon, 1984), and it can offer a window on teachers' thinking processes (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984).

Method

Participants

Eleven elementary teachers from three school districts volunteered to participate in this study. The districts represented a range of control over teachers' literacy instruction and assessment. Two teachers (grades 1 and 5) worked in a relatively low-control school district (District 1/low control). These teachers used basal readers, although they were not required to. Three grade 1 and two grade 1-2 teachers worked in a second district that exerted little control over teachers' teaching practice. This district was low in control in the sense that administrators did not require adherence to any particular methods and materials but encouraged the use of children's literature and the development of teachers' own approaches to assessment and gave support to both (District 2/low control). Four teachers (grades 2 (1), 4 (1), and 5 (2)) worked

in a highly controlling district (District 3/high control) in which the administration strictly enforced the use of a basal reader. Teachers were told what to teach, how to evaluate it, and were held accountable for adherence to a mandated, daily schedule of basal reader lessons and testing. This school district was urban, its teachers did not have a union, and it served a large population of primarily minority students, many of whom were also in poverty. In contrast, the two low control districts were both unionized, were relatively small, and served few minority students or students in poverty. In other words, there were substantial differences between the high and low control school districts, some of which were possibly related to the degree of control that was evident. Two of the teachers were in their first year of teaching. One was in the high control district (district 3), and the other was in district 1 (low control). All of the other teachers had at least four years of experience.

Report Cards

In each of the three districts in which these teachers worked, report cards followed what Freeman and Hatch (1989) called a "strand" format, comprised of the separate components of language considered to be important in the development of literacy. A summary of the report card formats and the strands they included is presented in Table 1.

Each report card required the teacher to assign a single letter or number grade for the different language arts "strands." Thus, all teachers had to work with a basic information model report card (Bray, 1986), which provides relatively impoverished information on students' literacy achievement. Additionally, each card had a small space for teachers' written comments and observations. In the first district, the grades (representing strands) were for: reading, composition, spelling, and speaking/listening. In the second district, grades were given for reading, spelling, and penmanship on the first-grade report card. Reading was divided into phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension sections. In the third district, grades were given for the following: reading, composition, spelling, and handwriting. In addition, a student's reading level was indicated in a separate box that listed the basal reader title, grade level, and whether or not the student was below, at, or above grade level. Students' writing ability was indicated by a number (1-7) that represented the scoring scale used by the external vendor who conducted the writing assessment.

The teachers and their contexts were diverse and can hardly be said to be systematically representative of other teachers and contexts. Indeed, although 25 teachers had originally agreed to participate in the project, when it came time to expose the thinking that went into their report cards, our group was reduced to 11. Moreover, our informal follow-up interviews with teachers who dropped out suggested that they find the composing of report cards too personal and conflict ridden to make public. Our analyses, then, are not intended to produce generalizable principles but rather to describe commonalities and differences among this group of teachers that others might use to investigate report card writing in their own situations.

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Table 1

Format of Language Arts Report Cards in The Three Districts

School District		
1	2	3
Components of Language Arts Grades		
Reading	Reading Phonics Vocabulary Comprehension	Reading
Spelling	Spelling	Spelling
Composition		Composition
Speaking/listening	Penmanship	Handwriting
Grading Scale		
1. Almost always	1. Indicates good progress at your child's level	A Excellent
2. Usually		B Above average
3. Sometimes	2. Indicates that your child is experiencing some difficulty	C Average
4. Seldom		D Below average
		F Failure to achieve
	3. Indicates your child is experiencing serious difficulty	
Teacher Comments Area (in inches)		
1 1/2 X 3	2 1/2 X 3 1/2	1 X 3 1/2
Parent Comments Area (in inches)		
2 X 3	1/2 X 8	1 X 3

Note: Almost always, Usually, Sometimes, and Seldom were phrases used to describe student performance under the different language arts strands. For example, under the strand of Reading, students were graded for "Comprehends what is read", "Uses decoding skills", "Exhibits an interest in reading". For Composition, students received grades for "Organizes ideas well", "Revises written work", and "Edits for correct punctuation, capitalization, and grammar".

Procedure

We asked the teachers to think aloud into a tape recorder as they wrote their students' language arts report cards and to describe the processes and information they used. Each teacher provided think-aloud protocols on a minimum of three students, although the average number of protocols per teacher was 6.8. In the process, the teachers referred to diverse materials, including grade books, reading journals, basal reader and standardized, norm-referenced test results, worksheets, written notes, mental notes, writing folders, writing journals, and portfolios of student work and, of course, their report cards.

The audiotapes were transcribed for analysis. In the absence of previous research examining teachers' report card composition processes, we used a system of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop a description of these teachers' report card compositions. A series of readings of the transcripts suggested that the teachers' report writing was influenced by the perceived audience of the report card and the purposes for which report cards were written. Audience and purpose, in turn, influenced teachers' selection of information to describe students' literacy achievement. Each of these three dimensions of report card writing was influenced by the context in which the teacher worked. At the same time, at least in part because of the contexts in which they worked, the teachers had different knowledge about their students and valued different aspects of literacy development (Johnston, Afflerbach, & Weiss, 1990). Thus, our subsequent analyses focused on describing the audience and purpose of report cards, the information teachers used as they wrote them, and the contexts in which teachers worked. Ultimately, our analyses focused on conflicts the teachers experienced in writing report cards as these various influences converged.

Checks on the validity of our interpretations of the data were provided by follow-up interviews with participating teachers. These member-checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) interviews also provided clarification of issues raised by the data.

Findings: Dimensions of Report Card Writing

We use excerpts from the think-aloud protocols to illustrate the composition processes teachers used. We focus separately on the perceived audiences and purposes for writing report cards, the information selected to describe literacy achievement, and the context in which individual teachers used their knowledge and values to write report cards. This separation is for clarity of presentation and does not suggest that these factors are easily disentangled from the composition process. Indeed, some overlap in discussion is unavoidable. Throughout, it will be clear that report card writing often involved serious conflicts for these teachers that they resolved in different ways. Although the subheadings in the article reflect aspects of the composition process, the central theme is the conflicts that arose in the process.

Perceived Audience and Purpose

The 11 teachers wrote report cards for diverse audiences, including students, parents, and administrators. The perceived audience and purpose varied from district to district, teacher to teacher, and sometimes within an individual teacher, from student to student. These teachers wrote report cards to different audiences to serve different purposes: to inform parents, to change student or parent behaviors, to motivate students, and to demonstrate accountability to administrators and parents. Some teachers wrote for a general audience.

District 3 (high control) mandated basal reader use and focussed on standardized test scores to prove school accountability. Working in this context, the fourth-grade teacher wrote report cards with the purpose of providing evidence of her accountability. The perceived audience was any parent or parents who might question a student's grade.

> That's what I am always recording...the main objective is what the basal reader highlights each week...for the test...the ITBS...comprehension... picking out the main ideas... I usually write it down... but I have 29 students and I said "Forget this"...I can't keep up with this...so it's written work on the basal sheets...and I listen to them read orally...and I might note "A" or "B" and that's just over to the side...and also for spelling...they have a notebook for spelling...and I'll give them a grade...but I really record this way so that if a parent comes in asking about "Why did my child get a C?" I can say "because of such-and-such."

The teacher's central purpose, which was influenced by district policy and the school/home relationship, was to demonstrate her accountability to parents.

Report cards were also written to prove accountability to school administrators. Again, in the high-control district, the fourth-grade teacher's purpose was met through the accurate transcription of numbers (representing scores on basal reader worksheets) from the grade book to the report card. The composition of the grade was not without conflict. She noted that she did not like to rely solely on test scores. Yet, an influential audience, the school district administration, forced her to include only scores.

> (Adds five numeric grades and divides by seven.) This little girl has two incompletes, which means she was there and that she did not finish her work...and she gets an F...five grades divided by seven...not very high...so she has a 58...but I'm already covered...when I put it on her report card...I don't like to do that...but I have to...even if there is a borderline I can't change the grade...I can't help the grade...for one thing...our district manual...says...these numbers are what I have to use to be accountable.

Providing evidence of accountability was not the purpose of all teachers' report card writing. A first/second-grade teacher in District 2 (low control) addressed two audiences. She

wrote comments to her student but provided numerical-grade information to the student's parents. This teacher valued the student's book reading as an indicator of literacy achievement, whereas she felt the parents were interested in the readability levels of the books their daughter read. This produced a conflict for the teacher so she used the two components of the report card format, numerical grades and written comments, to address the two audiences and to serve two purposes. The purpose of the numerical grades was to demonstrate student achievement to the parents, and the written comments encouraged the student to continue independent reading.

> ...(her) reading (is) all "1's" (Excellent)...her parents are very competitive...they are very interested in the readability levels of what she is reading...for example...Patricia Reilly Giff books...very interested in her test scores...rankings...and especially any kind of numerical grades...but my comments (directed to student)..."Tell me about some of the great books that you find this coming year."

A first-grade teacher from District 1 (low control) had several purposes for writing a report card. First, she wanted to convince the parents that they needed to change their behavior. She believed that a change in the student's home life might contribute to better school performance. A second purpose was the development of evidence that might be used in legal or social service action involving the student's parents, should the home situation not improve. A third purpose was not to damage the student's self-image. Fourth, she wanted to represent the student's achievement accurately with a grade, but the grade was influenced by the teacher's other purposes: preserving the child's self-image and providing evidence that might influence decisions made by social service agencies about the family.

> For three-quarters of the semester he has been off-task due to the home situation...and his grade has gone down from...a B to a C+...it should probably be lower...but I can't...the kid's devastated enough...I can't take everything away from him...but I certainly have to show the parents by his grades that they have to get their act together...the kid's in trouble...we've contacted them time and time again...and nothing's been done...if we're looking at calling in social services...then the reflection that his grades have gone down will certainly support our case that his home life is not a healthy one.

These conflicting audiences, purposes, and consequences led to a difficult dilemma for the teacher and resulted in a grade that was an uncomfortable compromise.

These teachers wrote for a variety of audiences and purposes; some wrote for one audience, whereas others wrote for multiple audiences. The selection of an audience and purpose was influenced by several factors: the nature of the curriculum (what information related to literacy development the teacher had at her disposal), and program and district constraints and mandates. Relationships between the writer and the audiences clearly differed also. Some writing was defensive or apologetic in tone, signalling a conflict between what the teacher would

rather be doing and what she found herself doing in the face of a powerful audience.

Information Teachers Used to Compose Report Cards

The information these teachers used to describe students' literacy development varied from teacher to teacher and sometimes within an individual teacher, depending on the purpose and audience of the report card. In most cases it was apparent that the information written on the cards was a subset of the teachers' knowledge of students' literacy development. The selection of this subset was influenced by curricular methods and materials used in each classroom and program; values placed on the information by teachers, administrators, and parents; and school district policy.

A second-grade teacher in District 3 (high control) used several types of standardized "objective" information (i.e., a writing assessment grade-level-equivalent score, percentile rankings from a standardized reading test, basal reader worksheet scores) to describe a student's literacy achievement. In the following quote, the teacher began by referring to the student's score on a standardized writing test administered and scored by an external commercial organization:

> Now we have Marty...a 6.5...bless his heart!...on the ITBS he was forty-sixth percentile...I got him right at the beginning of the semester...so I have to observe him on my own...so now he has got to grade level 2.5...almost to 2.9...where he should be...and very close to the fiftieth percentile...so I think of him as almost on level ...on [the basal worksheets] he gets some 100 percents...once he got a 67 %...most of the time it's 100 %...so that would warrant him getting a B.

In contrast, a fifth-grade teacher in District 1 (low control), which did not emphasize standardized, norm-referenced test scores, included process-oriented information gathered from classroom observations of a student's reading and writing, including observations made over time. She noted that across the marking period, the student read increasingly challenging books and incorporated into her own writing the knowledge she gained:

> Jackie...a bright young lady...attacks a lot of books...has taken her reading knowledge...and brought it into her writing pieces by doing take-offs on Sweet Valley High...and take-offs on Little House... definitely an A for both subjects...and a comment that she is exploring new avenues and ideas in her book...she's taking more challenging books...even some C. S. Lewis books...which was real surprising...that she had an interest in.

It was also apparent that the information these teachers included in report cards was influenced by the schools' curricula. District 3 (high control) used basal readers and standardized test scores and required that teachers use scores from basal reader skills worksheets (e.g., sound associations, digraphs, summarizing, story comprehension, vocabulary reinforcement, predicting

outcomes) to compose report card grades. In some instances, this requirement transformed the composition of a report card grade on reading into a mathematical operation. The following excerpt represents the entire report card composition process for a teacher in District 3. The teacher averaged 10 basal reader worksheet scores. She used no other information on literacy development.

> I add up the numbers right across...58...50...100...60...100...100...84...70... and 70...that makes 792...then I count the number of grades...that's 10...and I divide by that...he gets a 79.2.

Although there was space for written comments on the report card, this teacher and the three other teachers in the highly controlling district did not use it.

The consistency with which teachers in District 3 (high control) used commercial test and worksheet information appeared attributable to several factors. First, teachers were required to use the basal reader and to have covered certain material by specified dates. Second, they were under extreme pressure to demonstrate accountability, and they were required to use basal reader worksheet scores and standardized reading test scores to do this. Third, these constraints led to the often exclusive use of basal readers and their accompanying worksheets for classroom instruction. The four teachers in the controlling district reported that students rarely read literature. Thus, teachers rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to observe their students choosing, reading, and discussing literature. Consequently, the information teachers *could* use related to students' literacy achievement was severely restricted.

In the two low-control districts, writing and children's choice of literature were more valued and more prevalent in the curricula. Thus, a fifth-grade teacher in District 1 (low control) provided a narrative of student achievement based on a variety of information. This teacher included many indicators of reading and writing strategy use, and her narrative reflected a curricular emphasis on the interrelated nature of language arts.

> Dennis...let's look at his journal...he's gone from retelling me the whole book in detail in his journal...to asking appropriate questions...or making comments...or reflecting...on what he feels throughout the book...he's another kid who is eating books up...actually I think they are all eating up books...the library at the end of the day needs an overhaul...he's really talking in group now...with group literature questions...he's reflecting and he's making comparisons from his books to other books...he had an A- last time...and he definitely warrants one this time

The think-aloud protocols showed differences in the sources of information or knowledge these teachers used to describe students' literacy development. Teachers in District 3 (high control) used test scores from basal reader unit tests and worksheets, and standardized reading tests, almost exclusively. In contrast, teachers in the low-control districts more frequently used references to books their students were reading to indicate literacy achievement. In the high-control district, the average number of specific tests mentioned per student was 1.7, and no

teacher mentioned a trade book. In the low-control districts these figures were 0.2 mentions of specific tests and 1.0 for trade books.

District Context and Teachers' Knowledge and Values

Although the report cards used in the three districts were relatively similar in format, the district contexts in which these teachers worked were markedly different in terms of instructional emphases and constraints, evaluative criteria, and administrative control. Some teachers were required to use a basal reader, whereas others could use a basal or children's literature. Some teachers were encouraged to develop their own observation and record-keeping systems while others were constrained to the basal system. Some felt free to supplement the report card; others did not. Some were under a heavy threat of accountability, whereas others were not. In addition, at least in part because of the contexts in which they worked, the teachers themselves had different knowledge about their students and valued different aspects of literacy development.

When teachers composed a comprehensive description of a student's literacy development, condensing it into a letter or number grade proved frustrating for most of them. For example, a fifth-grade teacher in District 1 (low control) did not feel that a letter grade was sufficient for describing a student's achievements, which included developing self-awareness as a "literate person." To reduce conflict, she provided written comments to augment the limited information the report card format allowed. The comments did not fit into the "Teacher's Comments" section, so she attached them to the report card. This teacher's comments also demonstrate a theme that was evident throughout the 11 teachers' protocols: the teachers did not enjoy giving grades.

> I really think that Mark sees himself as becoming more literate...a more literate student...whereas he was apprehensive in the beginning of the year...he was at B-...I would say that he's at...it's so hard... because he's made a lot of growth...but he's certainly not an A student...I hate marking!...probably a B...with several comments that he contributes to class discussion and that he has shown a great deal of imagination and improvement.

In contrast, when the composition of a grade consisted solely of a series of mathematical computations, the product of this grading process fit more easily into the report card format. Only teachers in District 3 (high control) used exclusively numerical grades to compose report cards.

> "So Jay has 14 worksheet grades....they total 1148...and I divide by 14...that's an 82 for reading."

Teachers in the high-control district, however, were not without conflict. Indeed, one of these teachers reported that the school district did not share her values and beliefs about the evaluation

of literacy.

> The whole process is frustrating...see...in graduate school...and I liked the program I was in..we looked at how to use portfolios in the classroom...that seemed like a very good way...a comprehensive way to look at what a student does...so I keep a portfolio...for each student...but it hardly matters...I mean it matters to me...they want to move teachers out of the schools that don't improve by a certain percentage on the standardized tests...and the report card has information related to the tests...so it's not only that the portfolios I have don't figure much...it's also that the alternative...their chosen alternative...is a bunch of test scores.

When asked how she felt about composing report cards, a second teacher in this controlling context clearly reflected Noddings' (1984) concerns over the consequences of grading:

> It's a given...it's necessary...I mean...every school has report cards...but what I have to include here is not what happens between me and my students...and I feel that I get caught in the middle of the student and grades...grades that I report but that I didn't make.

We asked teachers about the difficulties involved in writing report cards. Teachers in the high-control context of District 3 described conflicts related to themselves and to their students. One fifth-grade teacher commented that writing report cards was difficult because the information she was required to use did not accurately reflect her teaching ability and her success in teaching:

> I know that they have improved their reading and I had something to do with it...I am confident of that...now the test scores may say different for some of them...but the test score is <u>all</u> in this place.

Thus, some teachers had conflicts in writing report cards because their knowledge was not valued.

These teachers also faced conflicts related to the ability of the information required by the report cards to portray students' achievement to their satisfaction, and to having their personal knowledge of students not valued. The second-grade teacher in District 3 reported:

> One of the hardest things is...if it isn't the hardest...is what I want to include and what I have to include are not the same types of information...writing development...you know John is writing more than he ever has before...his characters and their talk...he is wanting to write...and what is his writing?...a 4.5

The teachers working under the high control of District 3 faced several obstacles to maintaining a caring relationship with their students. First, the district and some parents did not value the types of evaluative knowledge the teachers had. The district focus on test scores abrogated the teachers' role in evaluation. Although these teachers knew their students and their literacy achievement, this knowledge often did not find its way into the report card. The teachers often found themselves having to use indicators they did not value highly. In the extreme, the report card writing process did not include teacher knowledge at all.

> I know my students...and I don't think these grades [basal reader worksheet grades] are good for telling about any of the students...because I know my students...but I have to have something to stand on...some proof...because I don't want the superintendent or the principal or a parent to come in and question me...about how I know this child...they don't take our words for it...they need to see it on paper.

In only one instance did a teacher from the high-control district report using knowledge of a student's literacy development in place of a contradictory test score from a district-wide assessment. This reflects the threat of sanctions that teachers in the district faced had they not done things in the prescribed manner. This second-grade teacher considered using a writing assessment result consisting of a single numerical score on the card. However, she had knowledge of the student as a writer from working with and observing the child doing classroom writing tasks. She decided to use her knowledge in figuring the report card grade.

> Nan talks well...her writing should be as good...she's still 4.0...so they're saying she's still first grade...I know what happened...she can't spell that well... and they probably focussed on that...now for me...I listen to her tell me her outline before we start writing...so I know that she has outlined and planned what she wants to say...when we say writing skill... spelling is her weakest point...her handwriting has improved...so I know it's the spelling...and I sit with the students one on one...and this is a lot of work... and we go through the phonics thing...the sounding thing...so we'll sound out the correct spelling...so that 4.0...which represents a 1st grade score...I gave her an A in composition...'cause the writing and the spelling are separate as far as I'm concerned.

These teachers also faced dilemmas over the contribution of nonacademic personal knowledge to the report card. For example, a teacher in District 1 (low control) reported:

> Marci - it's been a real tough semester for her...she's gone way down...but she also had a father who recently passed away...and everything to deal with...her writing has been off-task...and that she hasn't been reading as much...last semester she got a B+...and I think she warrants a B+ for all that she has been through.

In this case, the teacher gave a heavy weighting to the personal, non-academic knowledge, particularly in moderating the student's grade.

In the high-control district, the fourth-grade teacher struggled to remain "objective" and screen out personal, nonacademic knowledge while composing the report card grade. With a student just below the cut-off score for the next highest grade, the teacher considered giving the student the higher grade. However, her greatest concerns were for her accountability. She resolved the dilemma by deciding that nonacademic, personal knowledge would compromise this accountability.

> Even if there is a borderline...I can't change the grade...I can't help the grade...for one thing...our district manual says...if anyone comes in to look at the grades...unless I start erasing them and changing them...these numbers are what I have to use to be accountable...so I have to be accountable ...whatever is in this book goes on the report card...no exceptions...the grade book is most important to me.

The teachers in District 3 (high control) consistently emphasized being able to prove the accuracy of their report cards, and the relationship between classroom measures and the report card grades. While focused on proving their own accountability (defending themselves and their jobs), it was more difficult for teachers to compose report cards that included their knowledge of students and indicated their caring for students.

Conclusion

We must first acknowledge the limitations of this study. In particular, the small group of volunteers who participated in our study are not systematically representative of the range of other teachers. Furthermore, verbal report data have several limitations (Ericsson & Simon, 1984), although the responses of teachers who dropped out of the study reinforce the nature and severity of the conflicts portrayed in the protocols. We believe the importance of this study lies not in generalizable conclusions but in the case examples and the commonalities that provide useful points of departure for those investigating report cards. Indeed, we hope that other teachers or school communities can use this study as a starting point for reflection on their own reporting practices.

In this study we found that these teachers were faced with choices of audiences and purposes and that they selected different types of information depending on the context in which they worked. Most importantly, each teacher's report-writing process was heavily marked by conflict. Noddings (1984, pp. 193-194) describes a basic conflict teachers face when grading students.

The great difficulty is in grading, which is an intrusion upon the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Here is a demand which both know to be an intrusion. The teacher does not grade to inform the student. She has far better, more personal ways to do this. She grades to inform others about the student's progress. Others establish standards, explicitly or implicitly, and they charge her to report faithfully in observance of these standards. Now the teacher is torn

between obligation to the employing community and faithfulness to the student...We are asked to look at the student as object - as a thing to which some measuring stick can be applied. Noddings' analysis rang true in our data, although often there was an awareness of the student as an audience which did indeed produce an uncomfortable dilemma. Teachers resolved this dilemma in a number of ways: by writing comments to the student, by adjusting the grade, and by rejecting responsibility for the consequences of the grade. Teachers in the high-control district tended to use the latter option, whereas the former two options were evident in the less controlling districts.

The actual composition process was substantially different among the 11 teachers. Although the form for communicating students' literacy development was relatively standardized, the apparently unequivocal nature of the grades produced belied the diversity of audience, purpose, information, and valuing that went into their construction. Some of this diversity appeared to be attributable to the context in which a teacher worked. The most controlling context valued and enforced standardized test scores and basal reader unit test scores. These provided the vocabulary of evaluation. Teachers' knowledge of students' literacy development that was different was devalued. The teachers' roles as authors of report cards were such that they became frustrated recorders of evaluative information that they gathered through "other" sources.

It could be argued that these teachers could have added their own comments to report cards. However, in order to take advantage of the limited opportunity that was available, the teacher would need to believe that the information he or she had was valuable, or would be valued, and was "defensible" in the manner of other "hard" (e.g., numerical) data. The need for the judgement to be defended against probable attack was paramount.

In contrast, teachers in the less controlling contexts were more comfortable relying on notes, classroom observations, and anecdotal records to help them develop their descriptions of students' achievement. They more often included references to the reading and writing processes that students used in the classroom and to the specific interactions students had with particular books. These teachers tended to describe their students as independent readers, writers who incorporated books they read into their own writing, and people who conferenced about books and writing. The teachers in the controlling context described their students in substantially different terms, as reading skills lesson participants, test-takers, and basal reader worksheet completers. Given these contrasts, it is not surprising that the information used in the report cards varied drastically across the contexts in our study.

In all three districts, the report card format limited the nature of communication between the teacher and her intended audience(s) above and beyond curricular and/or administrative constraints. All report cards required that teachers assign single grades to "parts" of literacy, which often resulted in a mismatch between teachers' knowledge and the means of communicating that knowledge. None of the three report card formats allowed much room for teachers' descriptions of students' literacy development. Some teachers extended the space by attaching narratives; others did not use any of the space. To compensate for the constrained form of the report card, some teachers established contact with parents throughout the school year or took

advantage of parent-teacher conferences to provide ongoing narratives of student progress and achievement. Thus, the report card was part of the larger pattern of communication between teacher and parent.

Our exploratory study suggests several important areas for future research. We have described teachers as authors who, in writing report cards, face difficult challenges in balancing information, addressing different audiences for different purposes, and juggling weighty ethical dilemmas. Research beyond our small sample is needed to clarify how teachers in a wider range of school and community contexts construct the text of report cards and to explore the generality of our observations.

These teachers faced many conflicts as they wrote report cards, which raises the issue of how report card formats arise in the first place. Investigation of the diverse ways in which report cards are constructed or revised, and the roles played by different parties in the process is of great practical importance. In addition, such studies would contribute to the explication of the conflicts that teachers face as they use report cards.

Investigation of the various ways in which report cards are integrated into the larger network of communication between school and home is another important area for future research. The extent to which a report card must bear the burden of communication could have considerable consequences, not only for the process of writing report cards, but also for the reading of them, and for the consequences of those readings for students. Research in this area is critical if we are to make informed decisions about changing the reports themselves. Although our group of teachers *intended* to reach particular audiences, the extent to which their efforts were effective is not known. An understanding of how parents make sense of report cards would contribute considerably to informing the construction of the format, the composition of the report, and efforts to reduce the dilemmas that teachers face.

The teachers in our study were often aware of some of the potential consequences of report cards for students. However, apart from the reports of physical abuse, to date there has been virtually no investigation of the actual consequences of report cards for students. The cognitive, motivational, affective, and physical consequences may be particularly serious for some students. In addition, we know little or nothing about the effects of report cards on the relationship between teacher and student. Unravelling the causes of differences in the ways teachers deal with students as a direct or indirect audience for their report card writing will also constitute an important domain of research, as will investigation of the ways in which teachers and school districts constructively reduce the dilemmas teachers face.

Prior to this study, we assumed that the report card writing process required teachers to make many decisions that would confront them with dilemmas. The literature related to teachers' knowledge and values (e.g., Lyons, 1990) suggested that conflict might occur when report cards are written because teachers may have to reconcile different value systems. However, we did not anticipate the variety of conflicts that these teachers reported while composing report cards. Nor did we anticipate how stressful teachers would find the report writing process or how severely the process would be affected by the constraints under which

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teachers worked. We hope that this report prompts teachers to talk and write more publicly about these dilemmas, which are rarely discussed, and to form research communities to investigate ways to change the situation and ways to consider the consequences of their efforts for students. The consequences of these conflicts for teachers' and their students' lives must not continue to be swept under the rug.

Note: We wish to thank the teachers who participated in this study, and we deeply respect the courage it took to do so. No seniority is implicit in the order of authorship.

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